DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 266 SP 037 017

AUTHOR Bezzina, Michael; And Others
TITLE Shared Christian Praxis as a Basis for Religious Education Curriculum: The Parramatta Experience.
PUB DATE Oct 96
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Religious Education (Southport, Australia, October 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Catholic Schools; *Curriculum Development; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Instructional Innovation; Program Evaluation; *Religious Education; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Victoria); *Praxis

ABSTRACT

The Shared Christian Praxis model for religious education, developed by Thomas Groome and described in the diocesan religious education curriculum, "Sharing Our Story" (SOS, 1991) has been highly influential in Australian Catholic religious education. This paper explores the planning, implementing, and evaluating of religious education using this model, and describes its implementation in the Parramatta (Australia) diocese in a modified form. Shared Christian Praxis focuses on all aspects of student activities and environment. The Parramatta model involves four movements: life experience, Christian Story/Vision, critical reflection, and action response. These movements may happen within a lesson, a day, a unit, or across several units. Each movement is described with an emphasis on content and method. The review of this model of religious education reveals that: (1) praxis is a major strength of SOS; (2) SOS has played an important role in the planning and teaching of religion in Catholic schools in the diocese; (3) the collaborative process used in developing support documents has contributed to a growing confidence and sense of curriculum ownership of religious educators; and (4) teachers feel a sense of security through adaptation of Groome's model. The problems identified with the implementation of the model in Parramatta were a tendency for teachers to see it as a lockstep approach, and lack of understanding of and/or difficulty in implementing the critical reflection phase. (Contains 15 references.) (ND)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 401 266

# Shared Christian Praxis as a basis for religious education curriculum: The Parramatta experience.

**A paper presented at**
**the Annual Conference of**
**the Australian Association for Religious Education**
**Southport**
**October, 1996**

**Michael Bezzina, Peter Gahan, Helen McLenaghan and Greg Wilson**
**Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Bezzina
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SP037017

**Shared Christian Praxis as a basis for religious education curriculum: The Parramatta experience.**

## 1.0 Introduction:

The Diocese of Parramatta has been working with Thomas Groome's Shared Christian Praxis model for the last eight years. *Sharing Our Story,* the diocesan religious education curriculum, published in 1991, has just been evaluated, and the Diocese is about to embark on a revision of that curriculum. Moreover, since the writing of *Sharing Our Story*, Groome has released a more complete exposition of the thinking behind praxis and its movements. We considered it timely, then, to deepen our understanding of Shared Christian Praxis and to refine its implementation as the guiding framework for our diocesan religious education curriculum.

With Terry Lovat (1991:36), we believe that shared Christian praxis is "by far the most admirable faith forming religious education model available today because of its educational and theological precision". We are also, like Lovat, aware of its limitations, and bring to our understanding the benefits of extended and broad based implementation across a diocese. This paper is an attempt to share some of the learning that has gone on to date in our journey of planning, implementing, reviewing and now refining our approach to religious education. We want to share our developing understandings of what Groome's model of shared Christian praxis is (and, therefore, is not). We will describe its implementation in the Parramatta diocese in a modified form, and outline the findings of the review of *Sharing Our Story* led by Associate Professor Patricia Malone of the Australian Catholic University (Malone, Chesterton, Ryan and MacDonald, 1996). Finally we will present a case for using Shared Christian Praxis as a framework for a religious education curriculum by placing it in the contexts of education in general and of religious education in particular.

## 2.0 Groome's Shared Christian Praxis

Shared Christian Praxis has been highly influential in Australian Catholic religious education. Its influence is acknowledged by curriculum developers throughout Australia, including those of the revised Melbourne Guidelines which are used in Catholic Diocesan schools of Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and the Northern Territory. In NSW, it has had a strong influence upon the development of the Parramatta Diocesan curriculum *Sharing Our Story* which is used in the dioceses of Canberra -Goulburn and Wilcannia -Forbes. The approach is also recommended in the Dioceses of Bathurst and Broken Bay. There is a clear and acknowledged influence of

Shared Christian Praxis upon the approaches to religious education recommended in Collins/Dove publications of the 80's and 90s including the Primary text series*StoryMakers*(1993) and the recently completed Secondary text series *Growing Together in Faith* (1993-1995) . With the revision of the Melbourne and Parramatta Guidelines, curriculum developers are emphasising the need for a more critical and creative use of approaches to religious education, consonant with the intent and dynamics of Shared Christian Praxis, that respect the complexity of the teaching learning event and the artistry required by the teacher in facilitating that event.

Groome's writings on Shared Christian Praxis present a challenge to even the most committed of readers, due as much to his literary style as to the breadth of his scholarship. This section of the paper attempts to provide an introduction to Groome's major ideas, with some indication of their evolution between 1980 and 1991.

*2.1 An outline of Shared Christian Praxis*

In 1991, with the publication of *Sharing Faith,* Thomas Groome elaborated upon both the foundations and approach of Shared Christian Praxis first outlined in *Christian Religious Education* (1980).

Groome refers to Shared Christian Praxis as a "meta-approach" (1991: 280); a "framework" and "style of ministry" (1991:296). In educational terms, then, understanding Shared Christian Praxis simply as a pedagogical method or strategy is inappropriate. Notions of style and framework are more approriate.

In *Sharing Faith,* Groome defines Shared Christian Praxis as

> ... a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their socio-cultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith towards God's reign for all creation. (1991:p.135)

There is both continuity and evolution in Groome's description of the movements of Shared Christian Praxis between 1980 and 1991 as illustrated in the table below.

**Table One: The evolution of Shared Christian Praxis**

| CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (1980) | SHARING FAITH (1991) |
|---|---|
| | Focussing Activity |
| M1 : Naming Present Action | M1 : Naming/Expressing Present Action |
| M2 : The Participants' Story and Vision | M2 : Critical Reflection on Present Action |
| M3 : The Christian Community Story and Vision | M3 : Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision |
| M4 : Dialectical Hermeneutics Between the Story and Participants' Stories | M4: Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants' Stories and Vision |
| M5 : Dialectical Hermeneutic Between the Vision and Participants Vision | M5 : Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith |

The most obvious development between 1980 and 1991 is the addition of a Focussing Activity which precedes the five movements. An effective Focussing Activity "turns" the attention of students to their own lives and the world in which they live, including their relationships with friends, their family, school, local and inter/national communities. It introduces the "generative theme" or topic of the learning experience or unit of work. It engages the attention of students, providing motivation for learning that is participative and dialogical. In educational terms, this is a most valuable development of Shared Christian Praxis as an approach. The Focussing Activity allows for strategies that prepare for and lead into the naming and critical reflection upon present praxis, or "consciousness raising", that are the intent of Movements 1 and 2.

Movement 4 is the heart of the Shared Christian Praxis approach for it is here that the dialogue between the students personal story and vision and the Christian Story/Vision is intensified. The "dialectical hermeneutics" of Movement 4 involves

1. Critical interpretation of both present praxis of self and world *and* the Christian Story/Vision using critical reason, memory and imagination
2. Present praxis and Story/Vision interpret each other inspiring new insights, commitments.... "wisdom".

All the movements are dependent upon the integrity of reflection, dialogue and participation in preceding movements. The Christian Story/Vision is disabled in its power if the teacher has failed to make it accessible to students in Movement 3. If the dialogical hermeneutic of Movement 4 is superficial the response of Movement 5 will be artificial rather than a expression of a renewed way of being in the world.

Since 1980, Groome has argued for a critical and creative use of Shared Christian Praxis which allows for a combination and/or variation of movements in the way a

composer orchestrates a symphony. It is a model more at home with the image of the teacher as artisan than as technician. Whilst Groome does not propose Shared Christian Praxis as a lock-step methodology, there is a natural logic to its dynamics and the relationship between its movements. Shared Christian Praxis can provide a way of structuring discussions, presentations, lessons and units, retreats, indeed any event with an educational intent or dimension. This is not to deny that different elements within the broad school curriculum may be more suited to an emphasis on different movements of Shared Christian Praxis .

*2.2 Shared Christian Praxis as praxis, as Christian and as shared.*

The intent of Shared Christian Praxis is "conation/wisdom in the Christian faith" (1991:296) . Religious Education, for Groome, is an enterprise of *information* and *formation* that empowers people to *transform* themselves and their world. The present **praxis** of students is defined by Groome as referring to their whole way of being as people who act and are acted on and so Shared Christian Praxis accordingly focusses on all aspects of the students' activities and the world in which they live. For Groome, praxis has active, reflective and creative aspects.

| | |
|---|---|
| active | developing consciousness (Movements 1, 3) |
| reflective | developing critical consciousness (Movements 2,4) |
| creative | exploring and expressing a new consciousness and way of being in the world (Movements 4,5) |

As Shared **Christian** Praxis, the approach seeks to make "accessible" to students a Christian Story and Vision grounded in the living faith and tradition of a Christian community that sponsors the educational institution. Whilst, the Christian Story includes the scriptures, traditions and liturgies of a particular Christian church praxis is an approach which is committed to the ecumencial dimension of all genuine Christian education (Groome, 1991:216-217) . Christian Vision is prompted by the Christian Story. It is grounded in the vision of Christ, the reign of God. In its orientation to the reign of God, religious education, for Groome, is a renewing and creative process that invites discernment and decision by students. Groome claims that Story and Vision are effective metaphors emphasising the historical and practical nature of Christian faith and promote a sense of belonging to the community that bears it, of ownership and responsibility for it. As metaphors, 'Story' and 'Vision' suggest a tradition that engages and makes meaning; one that encourages dialogue and conversation.

As **Shared** Christian Praxis, this approach emphasises mutual partnership, active participation, and dialogue with oneself, others, with God and with the Christian

Story/Vision. Groome argues that Christian religious education is esentially concerned with Christian identity and agency which is radically communal with the implication that our pedagogy should promote our purpose. Groome urges a re-imaging of the traditional roles and activities of teachers and students towards co-operative learning, in which teachers and students learn to be partners by being partners and so move away from dependency and passivity in both learning and living.

### *2.3 Adapting Shared Christian Praxis*

Every approach to teaching and learning espouses an ideal for our preferred learning environment. In *Christian Religious Education* (1980) Groome identified the characterisitics of a learning environment ideally suited to Shared Christian Praxis . He saw this as a group of no more than twelve in an environment which is both physically and emotionally supportive of participation in co-operative learning, one in which students are sufficiently open and trusting to engage in reflection, shared dialogue and action. Every busy classroom teacher would have the same dream, but works in a different reality. Shared Christian Praxis, like every curriculum framework, requires critical adaption that recognises the unique characteristics of each learning situation. The next section of this paper illustrates the way in which Shared Christian Praxis has been adapted by the Diocese of Parramatta in its Guidelines, *Sharing Our Story*.

## 3.0 Shared Christian Praxis in Parramatta: *Sharing Our Story*

The Parramatta model was designed in order to embrace four overarching principles of good Religious Education in that the it was intended to be:

- child centred
- Christ centred
- able to provide for the integration of faith and life
- able to provide a holistic education

The four movements in the Parramatta model - Life Experience, Christian Story/Vision, Critical Reflection and Action Response capture these qualities. The movements may happen within a lesson, a day, a unit, or across several units. They are not necessarily implemented in sequence. How the four movements are interpreted and presented in classrooms in the Diocese will always be a matter for interpretation. This section

describes each movement with an emphasis on content and method, aspects of pedagogy that are of the greatest day to day concern to teachers.

### *3.1 Movement 1: Life Experience*

Life experience is usually - but not always -the starting point for the praxis approach. The focus of a learninig experience will often arise out of curriculum dictates, real issues facing a particular class group or critical concerns of the wider community. However, sometimes Movement 2 is a preferred starting point, arising out of a direct exposure to the Christian Story/Vision.

Whatever the starting point, there needs to be a clear focus which gives the learning experience its sharpness and concreteness. The focus is introduced early, but needs to be developed throughout the unit or lesson to provide coherence and continuity.

In Movement 1 students are asked to recall and reflect on an experience that relates to the topic or theme. They may need assistance in making the connection between events in their life and the topic. Feelings, actions, and knowledge are examined. Students are invited to tell their personal stories or relevant lived experience. Alternatively events may be illustrated by stories from literature. Contemporary events of significance may be given a vivid focus by video, news footage or personal witness. The teachers own experience and personal story may be shared where appropriate.

Once appropriate student participation is initiated the teacher may wish to expand the students interpretation of the story/event inviting students to consider past, present and future implications or to explore historical and cultural settings. Students, depending on their capacity, should be encouraged to be critically reflective on their experience.

The teacher should strive to establish a reflective atmosphere at suitable time/s in this movement to ensure students "listen" to each other and be attentive to their own thoughts and feelings. As part of this movement, the teacher could structure opportunities for a response/participation phase in which pupils suggest ways the experience they have identified can be expressed by signs and symbols, or given other interpretations. This movement requires listening, trust and a sense of security and the establishment of positive relationships.

### *3.2 Movement 2: The Christian Story and Vision*

As emphasised earlier, Movements 1 and 2 both relate to the theme under consideration. In this context, Movement 2 centres on a presentation of the Christian Story and

vision. The normal teaching content will be drawn from Sacred Scripture and Christian Tradition, church documents, moral issues, social justice, saints, heroes, local religious institutions and customs, parish life, sacraments, liturgy, spirituality, other religious traditions, church history etc. In Parramatta, the "content" with appropriate outcomes (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) is set out in the DiocesanCurriculum and the Support Unitswhich have been published for each of the six stages from K to 12.

Movement 2 addresses the very real priority of providing students with a body of substantial. It is not limited in its methodology. Teachers are encouraged to explore the whole range of teaching methods used in all KLAs to ensure maximum variety in their teaching. Films, drama, literature, role play, research projects, visiting speakers, visits to local sacred places are just a few examples of teaching methods/strategies used to give variety and maintain student interest.

Once again, as for Movement 1, the approach is not uncritical. Analysis and critique of the content is required.Within a reflective atmosphere, questions to be discussed could include – "Is this Christian Story/Vision relevant today ?" " What counter values are operative in our lives?" Connections should be made to other areas of student knowledge.

*3.3 Movement 3: Critical Reflection*

Still referring to the theme of the topic or unit, in this movement the teacher invites the students to think about the relationship between their life experience and the Christian Story. The main content of this movement is the juxtaposition and link between:

(a) the area of life that has been explored already with students and connections made with other dimensions of their life, and

(b) the elements of the Christian Story that has been brought into focus.

Key questions for the teacher will be - Where are the students at now and where am I leading them? What light does this aspect of the Christian Story/Vision throw on the students' Christian life? How does it aid their understanding of it?

Possible response/activities for students include – imagination exercises, exploring ways this story could/has changed events in their own and others' lives and exploration of how our culture supports or hinders the living out of the Christian life.

Respect for the freedom of the individual student to pass judgments and form an opinion is vital. Students' responses will depend on each one's development and state of faith.

### *3.4. Movement 4: Action Response*

In Movement 4, students are given the explicit opportunity to make decisions about how to live the Christian Faith in the world. Their response can be cognitive, affective or behavioural; it may be personal or communal, it may or may not involve an external expression. The movement has been labelled "Action Response" in *Sharing Our Story*, but practice has indicated it might be better labelled "Decision Response".

This movement has proved to be a stumbling block for many teachers - especially the inexperienced. This issue is discussed in the next section in more detail.

Its real content is the exploration of ideals, hopes, vision for the future, exploration of values, setting priority, deciding about personal commitment albiet vaguely. It seeks to encourage students to express feelings and attitudes that may lead to a greater self discovery. It focus is not simply **action** in the sense of going out and participating in community outreach programs – if that occurs then that is a bonus. Its goal is reflection on personal growth into the Christian Community. It raises questions – if this is the meaning of this Christian Story, what is my role in it, and am I going to be involved? Every reflection does not necessitate action, rather its effect can be cumulative so that later opportunities may be occasion for action. This movement may include ritualizing i.e. generating, planning and participation in a ritual or prayer service. Exploration of personal and communal symbols is an effective way of deepening awareness of the layers of the Christian tradition, and gaining a more sophisticated image of God.

The teacher's role will be to revisit the theme as part of closure by ritual, reflection, discussion etc. Teachers need to be confident and skilful in a range of strategies for use in this movement. Strategies include small group discussion, journaling, quiet time reflective reading, meditation, values clarification exercises, liturgy, shared prayer, exploration of symbols, developing images of God, participating in social justice programs, reporting back from outreach activities etc. Many of these activities require teacher skilling and readily available resources, neither of which should be assumed.

Having outlined the understanding of Shared Christian Praxis as reflected in the four movements of *Sharing Our Story* , the next section will address some of the learning to emerge from reflection on its implementation, particularly through a review in 1995.

## 4.0 The Review of *Sharing Our Story*

This section of the paper focuses on the evaluation of *Sharing Our Story* based on evidence gained by the review process led by Associate Professor Patricia Malone of the Australian Catholic University (Malone, et al., 1996). While the review focussed on more than the praxis methodology, it shed light on its implementation. In addition to the review findings, this section also reflects the experiences of those who have worked closely with Shared Christian Praxis.

The stated aim of the review of *Sharing Our Story* was 'to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the documents, with a particular focus on the assistance they provide[d] to teachers of Religious Education in the diocese'.

### *4.1 Major findings of the review*

In order to take into account the experiences of those who have used the Guidelines, surveys were sent to all schools and the priests of the diocese. Discussions were held with representative groups in the diocese to establish issues to be explored. Responses were further investigated by a series of interviews at a range of schools representative of the diocese.

Strengths identified were:

- that praxis was regarded as a major strength of *Sharing Our Story.*
- the important role played by *Sharing Our Story* in the planning and teaching of religion in Catholic schools in the diocese;
- the collaborative process used in developing the support documents based on Shared Christian Praxis — this contributed to the growing confidence and sense of curriculum ownership of religious educators;
- the sense of security given to many teachers through the adaptation of Groome's praxis approach and its implementation.

Surveys administered in the review identified the 'praxis approach' as the greatest strength of the *Sharing Our Story* . Responses to the surveys reflected the generally positive attitude of all respondents to the approach used in *Sharing Our Story.* The noted familiarity of all respondents with the documents was perceived as another strength. *Sharing Our Story* was seen as having improved the status of Religious Education and as having assisted the professional development of Religious Education

teachers. There was a great sense of ownership of the document, due in part to the collaborative nature of the development of the curriculum and the amount of inservicing attended by Religious Education teachers.

*4.2 Lessons from implementation*

While the overall response to *Sharing Our Story* was positive, weaknesses in the implementation of the praxis approach also became apparent. In this respect, the Review reflected other experiences in the Diocese. There were two major problems with the implementation of praxis in Parramatta. These were:

(i) a tendency for teachers to see it as a lock step approach, supported to some extent by a lack of clarity in original documentation;
(ii) a lack of understanding of the Critical Reflection movement and/or dificulty in implementing it.

4.2.1 A lock step approach

As has been earlier demonstrated, praxis is a framework rather than a specifc sequence of strategies. However, some of the early documents in the diocese emphasised the sequential nature of the movements, and the support documents in particular followed this sequence. As inexperienced teachers first encountered the praxis approach, they tended to over-rely on these materials. The resultant sense of security was counter-balanced by an inappropriately uniform approach to "praxis". This has begun to be addressed in the last two years.

4.2.2 Critical reflection

The Critical Reflection movement itself became problematic, particularly for the inexperienced teacher . In part this was because the "examples" in the support units became largely the material teachers used. A further reason for this was teachers did not generally realise that this movement depended to a large extent:

- on their explication of and reflection on the Scriptures and Tradition in the Christian Story movement;
- on their ability to lead the children to reflect on life and the Christian Story and Vision, and to work towards an appropriation of that Story and Vision for themselves and the children.

*4.3 Ongoing response to emergent challenges*

As problems with implementation emerged they were addressed in an ongoing way, not waiting for the impetus of the formal review.

To respond to the lock-step tendency, Religious Education Officers undertook year level planning exercises, where they worked with teachers in year levels at system and school levels. The purposes of this planning were: to help teachers program effectively; to flesh out support units; to 'wean' teachers off the support units. As recently as 28th August, 1996 at an inservice, a teacher shared an insight he had received only in the past month or so, that the praxis method was flexible, and that the movements flowed into and out of each other. At another inservice, a participant who was also doing some study in spirituality, in reflecting on the praxis approach, came up with a praxis spiral. In this, all movements can be present in each movement of the process, and at particular phases, some movements predominate. This reflects a growing appreciation of the complexity of the model.

In addition to various forms of inservice and collaborative planning, a Praxis Guide was recommended for realistic planning, to help teachers see how a unit could be developed over a period of weeks. Proformas were developed to help teachers plan and write up units.

The original model underwent some changes to accommodate problems as they arose. A modified version of the 'praxis wheel' showed prayer as being integral to the whole process. It would 'fit' wherever it might arise naturally — as well as being a planned part of a unit. Movement 4, originally labelled "Response" became "Action Response", to lead teachers a step further and to take emphasis away from the idea that this 'step' only included prayer celebrations. A reaction to this adaptation was that some teachers felt obliged to find an active response for each unit, at times when this may have been inappropriate.

*4.4 What have we learned?*

The Parramatta experience with praxis has led us to emphasising three major aspects of the use of Shared Christian Praxis. It is

- a meta-approach or overarching framework that is highly adaptable;
- a valuable tool for the construction of a religious education curriculum;

•a process in which 'knowing' cannot be separated from 'being': they are part of the one reality.

## 5.0 Shared Christian Praxis: Addressing the questions

The acid test for any approach to religious education is whether it has the capacity to meet the purposes for which it is intended both as a general educational activity, and one with a specifically religious focus. This section will address the extent to which Shared Christian Praxis stands up to this test. It will be structured in a way which addresses some of the major ways in which praxis has been critiqued.

Taking up the educational agenda first, some of the critical issues to be addressed are:

- Sound foundation in curriculum theory (Lovat, 1989, 1991);
- Capacity to address the needs of students at different stages (Malone, 1996) ;
- Capacity to cater for a range of teaching/learning approaches(Malone, 1996);
- Capacity to encompass general curriculum priorities e.g. the current outcomes focus.

With respect to the religious education agenda, the two major issues are:

- whether an "education in faith" approach is appropriate in the religious education classroom (Lovat, 1989, 1991; Rossiter, 1988)
- whether Shared Christian Praxis assumes faith on the part of students (Ryan and Malone, 1996;

### *5.1 The educational agenda*

#### 5.1.1 Praxis as an everyday approach to learning

One of the most telling arguments for a praxis approach is that it is very much an everyday approach to learning and developing. This argument is embodied in Groome's(1991:149) story of Joey, the seven year old who returns from school scratched and bleeding (a clear life experience to provide focus) to tell his mother about a fight in which he was involved. The mother's response was to ask what had happened (to express present action). Once the tale had been told, Joey was invited to consider why he had become involved in a fight, and what might happen if he continued to fight (critical reflection). The mother went on to share some of her own experience (not the Christian story, but a form of wisdom) and asks if she is making

any sense (an appropriation question). As the discussion came to an end , Joey was asked what he was going to do about the situation. (Response).

5.1.2 The foundations of praxis in curriculum theory

Aside from its intuitive appeal there is an extensive literature linking praxis approaches to curriculum theories arising out of the Habermasian view of three human interests (Smith and Lovat, 1991; Lovat, 1989, 1991; Butkus, 1989). Smith and Lovat (1991:76) state that "There is little doubt that the framework provided by Habermas, and the critical theory in general is one of the more important to come forward in recent times." Groome himself acknowledges a special debt to Habermas (1991:102). In short the Habermasian approach holds that there are three ways of knowing:

- Technical (focussing on knowing "what") - testable, empirical;
- Procedural (focussing on "how") - knowledge of symbols and shared meanings;
- Critical (focussing on "why") - knowledge of what has shaped things.

The praxis approach is a model which contributes to the development of critical knowledge, which is described by Smith and Lovat (1990) as follows:

> Generally, such knowing must be undertaken within a group enquiry context, where meanings of particular ideas and practices used in a specific location can be investigated and critically analysed. It is through such a group enquiry process that individuals can gain heightened understanding of their own actions as products of broader social, cultural and historical influences.

There are significant echoes here of Groome's emphasis on community, history, the Christian story and the need for critical participation. For example, he says (1991:135):

> Shared Christian Praxis is a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in place and time and on their sociocultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate it in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith towards God's reign for all creation.

Critical knowing requires a foundation in technical and procedural knowing. Thus, curriculum approaches drawing on this critical knowing (such as action research) embrace also outcomes approaches such as those growing out of Tyler, and the later process curriculum models. Praxis is clearly connected to current curriculum thinking.

One criticism of the utilisation of critical theory is raised by Lovat. He argues that the acceptance that God's word is to be found in the Christian Story in Movement 3 does not reflect the critical perspective required of the pure Habermasian approach. (Lovat 1991:34-35). Ultimately the extent to which we see this as a serious obstacle to the use of praxis depends on two factors. First, the extent to which we are prepared to accept some flexibility in the application of curriculum theory in judging approaches to religious education. Clearly purist notions of a curriculum theory should not form the paradigm for the judgement of a curriculum framework for an essentially value laden area of learning. Secondly, and more importantly, the extent to which we see the religious education classroom as a faith community in which the assumption about the Christian Story is acceptable. This is addressed when the paper addresses issues related to praxis as a particular approach to religious education.

5.1.3 The capacity of praxis to meet the needs of students at different developmental stages

Attention is now turned to the capacity of praxis to address the needs of students at different stages. A very practical argument in support of the suitability of praxis for different age groups is our own experience in Parramatta. Malone et al. (1996) question this in some of their general comments about praxis in the review of *Sharing Our Story*. However, the survey responses in the review as well as our day to day experience of the program reveal that the praxis framework has been found to be helpful across the K-12 continuum when applied appropriately.

Groome acknowledges his debt to developmental theorists both in the area of cognition (Piaget) and faith (Fowler). (Groome, 1991: 252, 484; Lovat, 1989:43). More fundamentally, however, any approach which explicitly addresses the lived experience of students as strongly as praxis must, by definition, be addressing the needs of students at different stages of development. The focussing activity and movement one both have the potential to surface very real agenda for all participants. For instance, Groome argues (1991:176) that "young children are more readily engaged in Movement 1 when the educator invites them to express their own action regarding a theme: this reflects their psychosocial development." Later, Groome (1991:279) addresses the question directly:

> Regarding age level, faith educators can begin to use shared praxis at least with participants who have reached the onset of concrete operational thinking ... From experience I believe that this approach can be used with people from very diverse backgrounds."

5.1.4 Does Praxis limit approaches to teaching?

An objection that is sometimes raised against praxis is that it is a limiting methodology. This criticism seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Shared Christian Praxis. For example, Malone and Ryan (1994:54) claim that the strategies of the final support units of *Sharing Our Story* reflect the Melbourne Guidelines 'more than a praxis approach". In the first instance, the authors of the Melbourne document have acknowledged a debt to Groome's work. Secondly, and more significantly, Shared Christian Praxis does not require a specific set of methodologies. It is not an approach to teaching, but as has been stated in Section 2.0 of this paper, a "meta-approach" - a framework more akin to a curriculum model than a teaching strategy. In fact an examination of the procedures suggested for each of the movements in the Groome (1991) volume reveals an framework which is highly inclusive of a vast range of strategies, and is adaptable to the range of classroom realities. Ryan and Malone (1996:128) acknowledge that praxis allows "for the use of a range of strategies to help students understand their own story and that of the tradition." They go on to state, quite correctly in the Parramatta experience, that a key issue is the way in which teachers interpret the approach - leading them at times to inappropriate use of strategies. The problem here is one of implementation rather than a fundamental issue with praxis *per se*.

5.1.5 The capacity of praxis to address outcomes

A question which is particularly germane in the current educational climate is the capacity of a curriculum based on praxis to focus on outcomes in the way that other syllabuses do in the rest of the curriculum. This is closely linked to the question of assessment. Looking at the movements, it is clear that movement 3 provides students with the fullest opportunity for an encounter with the Christian story which is "as academically rigorous and challenging as any other approach to teaching in such a context". (Groome, 1991:276). Applying this to assessment, Groome suggests three guidelines: Assessment should focus only on the cognitive element of learning; evaluation should reflect the cognitive processes used during teaching and learning; and students should only be assessed on their ability to adopt critical and well founded positions on the "cognitive content" made accessible, not on "preferred" positions. In Parramatta, we would probably wish to acknowledge a behavioural dimension of religious education which is also open to assessment - a set of religious skills if you will. These are being explored in our current revision of *Sharing Our Story*.

*5.2 The religious education agenda*

For some reason, the major Australian writers in the field of religious education in the last ten years have each raised some objection, or at least reservation, about the use of praxis in the classroom. This is despite its pervasive influence among - and obvious appeal to - practitioners and the writers of guidelines in this country. The major concerns will be addressed below:

5.2.1 Is an approach to faith development appropriate in the religious education classroom?

It must be said at the outset that this is an argument whose resolution has more to do with preference and fashion than with any objective criteria. The argument can be stated as a choice between the merits of education in faith and education in religion in the religious education classroom. The lines have been clearly drawn, with Malone and Rossiter opting for a separation between the two, and hence a reservation about approaches which attend to faith development in the classroom. Lovat's critique (1990:26-27) is more subtle, claiming that praxis does not entirely avoid taking on board many of the "seemingly inaccurate assumptions" of catechesis when applied to the classroom.

*Sharing Our Story* (1991:12) defines religious education as :

> A life-long process which empowers the teacher/learner to reflect critically upon her/himself, the world and God in the light of personal experience, Sacred Scripture and Tradition. This critical reflection enables the learner to pass judgements, make decisions and respond accordingly.

The same document supports the view of Marcellin Flynn (1985:143) that "good religious education requires both the educational challenge of the education in religion perspective, and the vision of the education in faith approach". Given the division of opinions on this issue it would seem then, that rather than asking whether an approach embodying faith development is an appropriate one, we should be asking whether, if we are working towards faith development, praxis is an appropriate framework. The answer is clearly yes. As Groome puts it (1990:194)

> In Christian religious education a separation of "education" from "formation" is false and debilitating to its purposes and the intent of

> conation and wisdom; wherever Christian religious education takes place - school, congregation, family - it is to engage the very "being" of participants as agent subjects and include and activity of critical reflection as I describe for Movement 2 of shared praxis.

5.2.2 Does Shared Christian Praxis assume faith on the part of students ?

Lovat (1991: 34-35) argues that praxis is justifiable within a Christian faith community, but that this may be hard to justify in school based religion education.

> Even in a church school it is highly optimistic to claim that we have a faith community, in the sense of a homogeneous group having freely chosen to be there, literate in and committed to the Christian faith, and wanting to know more about it.

He is joined in this concern, expressed in different ways, by Rossiter, Malone and Ryan in a number of their writings. Once again, it seems, the decision about the appropriateness of praxis comes down to a question of definition. Whether the school can be considered to be a faith community depends on how we define it. Certainly the Congregation for Catholic Education(1988:27) recognised that there had been a transition in the Church's understanding of the school from institution to community, and that the notion of community was a theological one. The Diocese of Parramatta explicitly sees the school as a faith community, giving the heading "The School Faith Community" to part one of *Sharing Our Story,* (Catholic Education Office Parramatta, 1991:2) .

The critical definitional issue seems to be that of homogeneity. Must any community, let alone a faith community, be "homogeneous" with respect to any specific attributes, or even the extent to which it is literate and committed to any of its core values? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1964) defines community as: identity of character; fellowship; body of people having religion, profession, etc. in common." Common sense would seem to indicate that in any community there will be a range of expressions of membership depending on factors such as age, interest or experience. People "grow into"(or out of) community over time, with or without the support of that community. The implication in Lovat's words is that within the religious education classroom there is a diversity of faith commitment and so it is not a faith community. Surely an equally valid point of view is that there is a faith community, but one marked by diversity.

Rossiter (1988) and Ryan and Malone (1996) focus on the fact that the religious education classroom is made up of participants who are not adult (see the earlier discussion on age appropriateness) and may not be voluntarily present. This latter comment is a telling one, and links to the discussion of community. It is true, particularly in the older classes, that there will be students whose participation is not voluntary. This raises two issues. The fundamental one is whether a lack of faith precludes anyone from participation in praxis. A second is how we treat these "unfaithed" students (and hence the rest of the class).

A careful reading of Groome's approach to praxis does not seem to us to assume faith on the part of students. With respect to Movement 5, which calls for a response, is structured in such a way, Groome cautions gentleness, and reminds the reader that "freedom must be respected" (1991:278) and goes on to say "As in movement 4, respecting people's freedom of choice calls educators to a kind of relinquishment and also for patience about 'seeing results'." Nowhere does Groome state or imply that having faith is a pre–requisite for participation in the movements of Shared Christian Praxis. He speaks of a "natural" capacity and affinity to recognize the revelatory correlation between students own story and the Christian Story/Vision (1991:290). The language is "invitational" and refer not only to personal faith but the faith of the broader teaching/learning community (1991:292). In a very real sense Shared Christian Praxis provides an invitation to a deepening of faith, no matter what their starting point.

The answer of the education in religion school to the question of how to respond to a lack of faith in some students would seem to be that since we cannot assume that everyone in the group "has faith", we should treat them all as if they have none, and deal with faith formation in other aspects of school or parish life. This has profound implications for the students who are on the journey of faith, leaving the education in faith to dimensions of school life which are often seen as "incidental" to the main game - school culture, prayer, retreats etc. In a very real sense, too, it simply shifts the problem from the religious education classroom to other areas of the school. How are we to deal with these students in the retreat program, for example?

The Catholic Education Office (1991:5) argues in favour of diversity - including diversity of commitment: "This pluralism and diversity within the school community has the potential to enrich faith development and educational opportunities available to all."

## 6.0 Conclusion

This paper grew out of a desire on the part of a group of religious educators to deepen their understanding of Shared Christian Praxis both in theory and in practice -in a sense to engage in their own form of praxis on praxis.

We have tried to provide a simple overview both of Groome's Shared Christian Praxis and of praxis as implemented through the religious education program *Sharing Our Story* in the Diocese of Parramatta. Our recent review, after five years of using the program, has led us to an appreciation of some of the challenges of implementation. Moreover, it has challenged us to go back to basics to address some of the criticisms of praxis which have appeared in the literature in recent years. We have been particularly concerned with the rather one-sided debate taking place in the Australian religious education literature, and see this paper as the beginning of an approach which is more truly a dialogue.

In the context of a diocean commitment to religious education which addresses both education in faith and education in religion, praxis still seems to provide a sound framework for curriculum design. It is clear however, that there are risks of distortion at the level of classroom and system level implementation which call for new rspsonses to the professional development of teachers and religious education coordinators. Implementation which is faithful to Groome's thinking calls for the religious educator to exercise all the skills of the artist:

> Such good art never comes easily but is a lifelong challenge for all religious educators. It is enhanced by trying to do it and by critical refelction on our efforts. ... We should approach it with the discipline, preparation, self investment, and imagination required of any fine artist. Yet we are always to remember that we are never more or less than artists in the work of another Creator - the One who gives the increase from our "sharing faith".

## Bibliography


Butkus, R.A. (1989) Linking social analysis with curriculum development: Insight from Paolo Freire. *Religious Education, 84,* 1, 568-583

Catholic Education Office, Parramatta. (1991) *Sharing our story: Religious Education Curriculum.* Parramatta: Catholic Education Office.

Congregation for Catholic Education. (1988) *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school.* Homebush: St. Paul Publications.

Flynn, M. (1985) *The effectiveness of Catholic schools.* Sydney: St. Paul Publications

Groome, T.H. (1980) *Christian religious education:Sharing our story and vision.* Blackburn: Dove Communications.

Groome, T.H. (1991) *Sharing faith: A comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry..* San Francisco: Harper.

Koszarycz, M. (Ed.) (1993) *Peacemakers (Storymakers series),* North Blackburn:Collins Dove.

Lovat, T.J. (1989) *What is this thing called religious education?* Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Lovat, T.J. (1991) The critical model of religious education:Justification and some live evaluations. *Word in Life, 39,* 2, 18-20.

Macdonald, M. (Ed.) (1993) *Journeys in faith (Growing together infFaith series).* North Blackburn: Collins Dove.

Malone, P. And Ryan, M. (1994) *Sound the trumpet.* Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Malone, P., Chesterton, P., Ryan, M. And Macdonald, M (1996) *Report on review of* Sharing Our Story , Strathfield: Australian Catholic University.

Rossiter, G. (1988) Perspectives on change in Catholic religiouss education since the Second Vatican Council. *Religious Education, 83,* 2, 264-276.

Ryan, M. And Malone, P. (1996) *Exploring the religion classroom. ?* Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Smith, D.L. and Lovat, T.J. (1991) *Curriculum: Action on reflection.* Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.